

The weight of waking

"Numb all the pain, feel like nothing to stay

I'm still chasing a ghost and I don't ever think I'll stop feeling this way."

William

The apartment smells different now. For three years, it smelled of lavender air freshener and stagnation. Now, it smells of industry. The sharp, chemical tang of fresh oil paint. The bitter aroma of cold coffee. The ozone smell of a laptop running hot for twelve hours straight.

The apartment was a crime scene. I stood in the middle of my living room, surveying the damage. The broken reflector stand lay where it had fallen, its metal shaft bent at an unnatural angle. Blue paint stained the floor near the easel—evidence of the jar I'd thrown, the brushes I'd scattered, the complete loss of control that had turned this space into a battlefield.

The space where Est had stood. The space where I'd screamed at him to get out. I couldn't look at it.

I couldn't look at it directly. Every time my eyes tried to land there, they skittered away, finding something else to focus on—the wrapped paintings by the door, the stack of empty delivery containers, the dust motes floating in the afternoon light.

Ten new pieces. That's the goal. That's what I'd told myself when I'd woken that first morning after everything fell apart, my throat raw from screaming and my hands still shaking from the violence of my breakdown. Ten pieces that scream I am alive to drown out the whisper of I am broken.

Instead, I turned to the canvas on the central easel—the portrait I'd started weeks ago, when everything had felt possible. Est's face looked back at me in loose charcoal strokes, half-finished, caught between sketch and painting. Black, white, grays. No color yet. I'd been planning to add the amber around his eyes, the particular warmth of his skin in afternoon light. I'd been planning to capture the way he looked when he was genuinely curious about something—that slight tilt of his head, that intensity in his gaze.

Now the unfinished canvas felt like an accusation.

"What did you do?" I asked the empty apartment. My voice came out rough, scraped raw from crying. The sound of it startled me—I hadn't meant to speak out loud. But the silence was so complete, so suffocating, that words had escaped without permission. "What the hell did you do, William?"

The portrait didn't answer. Of course it didn't. It was just paint and canvas, just lines and shadows, just the evidence of a feeling I'd tried to capture before I destroyed

everything. I grabbed the cloth I used to cover unfinished work and threw it over the easel. The fabric settled like a shroud, hiding Est's half-formed face from view.

Better. Worse. I didn't know anymore.

The vomiting started on the third day. I woke at 6 AM to a wave of nausea so intense it sent me scrambling for the bathroom, barely making it to the toilet before my body emptied itself. There wasn't much to expel—I hadn't eaten properly in days—but my stomach didn't seem to care. It heaved and clenched and punished me anyway.

The new medication, I thought distantly, my forehead pressed against the cool porcelain of the toilet seat. Dr. Chaisri warned me about this. The pills sat on my bathroom counter—two bottles now, one for anxiety, one for depression. My psychiatrist had adjusted my prescriptions after our emergency session three days ago, the one I'd requested when I'd realized I was spiraling faster than I could control. I'd called her at 2 AM, my voice shaking, and she'd talked me down from the ledge of a panic attack that had felt like it might never end.

"The new anxiety medication works differently than what you were taking before," she'd explained during our video call, her face calm and professional on my laptop screen. "It targets the panic responses more directly. But the adjustment period can be rough. Nausea, dizziness, sometimes headaches. Give it two weeks." Two weeks. Fourteen days of feeling like my body was rejecting itself from the inside out. Fourteen days of waking up sick and going to bed exhausted and working through the hours in between because the alternative was lying in the dark and thinking about everything I'd broken.

I dragged myself off the bathroom floor and took the pills anyway, washing them down with water that my stomach immediately protested. Then I went back to bed and waited for the nausea to pass.

It took three hours.

By the time I could sit up without the room spinning, the morning was half gone. I checked my email—habit now, a compulsion I couldn't break—and found seventeen new messages waiting. Most were from my manager, forwarded communications from galleries and collectors and the endless machinery of an art career I'd been neglecting. A few were from the café managers, questions about supply orders and scheduling conflicts and the mundane details of running businesses I'd never wanted to run.

Nothing from Est.

Nothing from Lego.

I told myself I was relieved. I told myself it was better this way. I told myself the

silence was what I deserved, what I'd earned, what I'd chosen when I'd slammed that door.

Then I opened my painting supplies and got to work. The days blurred together after that, defined not by time but by tasks.

Wake up. Vomit. Take medication. Wait for nausea to pass. Work.

The work was the only thing that made sense. Canvas after canvas, piece after piece, each one a small exorcism of the demons that wouldn't stop screaming inside my head. I painted abstract pieces—swirls of color and chaos that I couldn't explain but couldn't stop creating. I painted realistic pieces—detailed renderings of memories I was trying to preserve before they faded entirely.

I painted my mother's garden. The kitchen with the blue tiles. The café on the ground floor of the house I might never see again.

I painted Est's hands, from memory—the way they'd held his camera, careful and precise. The way they'd touched my face that night before everything fell apart.

I painted Lego's flowers, wilting in their vase.

Each piece felt like bleeding. Like cutting myself open and letting the poison drain out. It hurt, but the alternative—the stillness, the silence, the crushing weight of my own thoughts—was worse.

I painted until my hands cramped and my vision blurred. Until the apartment was thick with the smell of turpentine and the floor was littered with discarded sketches. Until my body gave out and I collapsed on whatever surface was nearest—the couch, the studio floor, once in the bathtub again, my cheek pressed against the cold porcelain while I waited for sleep to claim me. And then I woke up and did it all again.

The compulsive behaviors shifted. I noticed it gradually—the way the rituals that had defined my life for three years were slowly losing their grip. The door-checking had stopped almost entirely; I'd go hours without verifying the locks, something that would have been unthinkable a month ago. The window-checking had decreased too. Even the constant hand-washing had become less urgent.

But the work had taken its place. The painting was the new compulsion, the new anchor, the new thing I couldn't stop doing even when I wanted to. My brain had simply traded one obsession for another. Is this better? I wondered sometimes, in the rare moments of clarity between painting sessions. Is this progress, or just a different kind of madness?

I didn't know. And I was too afraid to stop long enough to find out.

Therapy Session

"Tell me what happened with Est." Dr. Suriya's voice was calm, measured—the same tone she'd used with me for the past three years of weekly video sessions. She sat in her office, framed by bookshelves and soft lighting, her expression professionally neutral but not cold.

I sat on my couch, laptop balanced on the coffee table, trying to organize words that kept scattering like startled birds. "I already told you."

"You told me the facts. He came for a photography session. You had a panic attack. You asked him to leave." She paused. "But you haven't told me what you were feeling."

"Does it matter?"

"It always matters."

I looked away from the screen, my eyes finding the covered canvas in the corner. Est's portrait, still hidden. Still waiting.

"I was angry," I said finally. "At him. At myself. At the situation. He was pushing me to—to be present, to be real, and I couldn't—" I stopped, frustrated with my own incoherence.

"What couldn't you do?"

"I couldn't perform for him." The words came out bitter. "He wanted the real me, the authentic artist, the vulnerable genius. And I was standing there in my pressed clothes and my styled hair, trying to pretend I had my shit together, and it was all—it was lies, Dr. Suriya. Everything about that session was a lie."

"Who was lying?"

"Me. I was lying." I ran a hand through my hair—unwashed now, three days without showering. "I put on those clothes. I opened the curtains. I tried to look like someone who was functional, who was ready for an exhibition, who had something worth photographing. But underneath all of it, I was still—"

"Still what?"

"Broken." The word fell out like a confession. "I was still broken. And when Est started pushing, when he started asking for something real, I couldn't—I couldn't give it to him because the real me is a disaster. The real me has panic attacks and doesn't leave his apartment and threw a jar of paint across the room because he couldn't handle being seen."

Dr. Suriya was quiet for a moment, letting my words settle. "You told me once," she said carefully, "that you wanted Est to see the real you. That you were tired of hiding. What changed?"

"Nothing." I laughed, the sound harsh and humorless. "That's the problem. Nothing changed. I still wanted him to see me. And then he did, and it was too much. Too much all at once. He was standing there with his camera, asking me to be present, and I could feel the walls coming down, and I—I panicked."

"So you pushed him away before he could leave on his own." The accuracy of it hit me like a physical blow.

"Yes."

"Because everyone leaves."

"Because everyone always leaves." My voice cracked. "My mother died. My father replaced her within a year. Every person I've ever let close has eventually decided I was too much work, too difficult, too—too everything. So when Est started pushing, when he started getting close to the real mess underneath, I thought—if I push him away first, it won't hurt as much when he inevitably leaves anyway."

"Did it work?"

I thought about the silence of the past five days. The unanswered messages. The covered portrait. The way I kept checking my phone—my broken, half-functional phone—hoping for a notification that never came. "No." I admitted. "It didn't work at all."

"Tell me about Lego." Dr. Suriya's request caught me off guard. We'd been talking about the exhibition—the practical details, the logistical challenges of preparing twenty pieces while barely functional—and the sudden shift in topic made me blink.

"What about him?"

"You mentioned that you 'threw him out' the same day as the incident with Est. But you haven't told me the details."

I didn't want to tell her the details. The details made it worse. The details made it real. The details meant admitting that I'd hurt someone who had never been anything but kind to me, someone who'd been showing up every Wednesday for three years with flowers and patience and a love I'd done nothing to earn.

"He came to check on me." I said slowly. "After Est left. I think my manager called him, or maybe he just—he always knows when something is wrong. He has a key to my apartment. For emergencies."

"What happened when he arrived?"

"I was in my bedroom. Hiding. My manager and some workers came first, to collect Est's equipment. I couldn't face them, so I just—waited until they left."

"And then Lego was there."

"And then Lego was there." I closed my eyes, remembering. "He'd been cleaning. When I finally came out, he was sweeping up the broken glass from—from everything I'd destroyed. And I just—" My voice caught.

"Take your time."

"I was so angry," I said, the word coming out raw. "Not at him. At myself. At the situation. At the fact that I couldn't even manage to keep it together for one day without someone else having to clean up my mess. And he was there, looking at me with those eyes that always see too much, and I couldn't—I couldn't bear it."

"What did you do?"

"I grabbed him." The admission felt like glass in my throat. "I grabbed his wrist and I dragged him to the door and I threw him out. He hit the doorframe on the way through. I saw it happen. I heard the sound. And instead of stopping, instead of apologizing, instead of making sure he was okay—I slammed the door in his face."

The silence that followed was deafening.

"Have you contacted him since?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because what would I say?" I looked at the screen, at Dr. Suriya's patient expression. "'Sorry I hurt you? Sorry I've spent years taking your care for granted while giving nothing back? Sorry I treated you like furniture that could be discarded when I was in a bad mood?'"

"Those sound like the beginnings of an apology."

"They sound like excuses." I shook my head. "I've been drafting texts. Deleting them. Starting over. But everything I write feels hollow. Performative. Like I'm trying to manipulate him into forgiving me instead of actually taking responsibility for what I did."

"The difference between manipulation and genuine apology," Dr. Suriya said carefully, "is in the expectation. Manipulation demands a specific response. It says 'I'm sorry, now forgive me.' Genuine apology offers acknowledgment without conditions. It says 'I hurt you. I see that. I'm sorry. You don't owe me anything.'"

"What if he doesn't respond?"

"Then you'll have to sit with that discomfort. That's part of facing consequences."

Psychiatry Session

"You look terrible." Dr. Chaisri never sugarcoated things. That was one of the reasons I'd stuck with her for five years, even during the months when I'd ignored her calls and skipped our sessions—she didn't pretend everything was fine when it clearly wasn't.

"I feel terrible," I said. "The nausea is still happening. Every morning."

"Are you eating?"

"Some."

"Define 'some.'"

I thought about it. When had I last eaten? There were granola bars on the counter, half-finished. A package of crackers somewhere in the kitchen. Water—I was drinking water, at least, because the headaches were worse when I didn't.

"A little. Here and there. It's hard to eat when everything makes me feel sick."

"The nausea will pass." Dr. Chaisri made a note on her tablet. "Your body is adjusting to the new medication. But you need to eat, William. Even small amounts. I'll send you a list of foods that are easier on the stomach during adjustment periods."

"Okay."

"How's the anxiety?"

The question made me pause. How was the anxiety? I thought about it, really considered it for the first time in days. The constant checking—doors locked three times, windows secured, every exit point verified and re-verified—had been part of my daily routine for years. But lately...

"I stopped checking the doors," I said slowly. "I used to do it three times. Every time I left a room. But I haven't been doing that."

"When did you notice the change?"

"A few days ago. I was going back to check the front door lock, and I just—stopped. It seemed pointless. I'm the only one here. No one else can leave anything unlocked."

Dr. Chaisri nodded. "The new medication is targeting your OCD-adjacent behaviors. It's good that you're seeing results, even if the side effects are difficult."

"Is it normal? To just... stop caring about the things that used to consume me?"

"It's not that you've stopped caring. It's that the medication is helping regulate the anxiety response that made those behaviors feel necessary." She leaned forward slightly. "How does it feel? The stopping?"

I considered the question.

"Strange," I admitted. "Like I'm missing a limb. Like something that used to be essential is suddenly gone, and I don't know how to fill the space."

"That's a common experience during adjustment. Your brain is rewiring, learning new patterns. It can feel disorienting." She paused. "Is the anxiety showing up anywhere else? In new ways?"

The painting. The compulsive working. The way I'd barely slept in a week, moving from canvas to canvas to email to canvas again, never stopping long enough for the thoughts to catch up with me. "I've been working a lot," I said. "The exhibition is in two months. I need ten new pieces."

"How many have you finished?"

"Four. Almost five."

"In a week?"

"Yes."

Dr. Chaisri's expression shifted slightly—concern flickering behind her professional mask. "William. When was the last time you slept more than four hours?"

I tried to remember. The nights had blurred together, defined not by rest but by the brief periods of unconsciousness I managed between painting sessions. I'd fall asleep at my easel sometimes, waking with paint on my face and a crick in my neck. I'd collapse on the couch for an hour here, two hours there, never enough to truly rest.

"I don't know."

"That's not sustainable. You're trading one compulsion for another." She set down her tablet. "I want you to try something tonight. Set an alarm for eleven PM. When it goes off, stop working. Take a sleeping pill if you need to—I'll add it to your prescription. But you need to rest, or you'll burn out before the exhibition even opens."

"I can't stop working."

"Why not?"

"Because when I stop, I think. And when I think, I remember what I did." My voice went raw. "I pushed Est away. I threw Lego out. I broke my phone because I couldn't

handle the guilt. When I'm painting, I don't have to feel any of that. When I'm working, I can pretend everything is fine."

"But nothing is fine."

"No." I looked at the ceiling, blinking back tears. "Nothing is fine at all."

I talked to myself while I painted.

It had started accidentally—a muttered comment about a brushstroke that hadn't gone right, a frustrated exclamation when the color mixed wrong. But somewhere along the way, it had become a conversation. A dialogue with someone who wasn't there, a back-and-forth between parts of myself that had split apart and couldn't quite find their way back together.

"This isn't going to work," I said to the canvas in front of me. It was an abstract piece—swirls of blue and gray and a single slash of crimson near the edge. I didn't know what it meant yet. I never knew what the abstracts meant until they were finished, until I could step back and see what my subconscious had been trying to tell me. "Nothing works," I answered myself, my voice taking on a different tone—harsher, more critical. "You ruined everything."

I dipped my brush in ultramarine blue and added another layer to the gray. The colors bled together at the edges, creating something that looked almost like twilight. Or like drowning.

"You could apologize."

"Apologies don't fix anything. They're just words. Just manipulation dressed up as remorse."

"Is it manipulation if you mean it?"

I paused, brush hovering over the canvas.

Dr. Suriya had asked me the same question during our last session, when I'd told her I was drafting texts to Est and Lego and then deleting them before sending.

"What stops you from sending the messages?" she'd asked.

"They feel manipulative," I'd replied. "Like I'm trying to make myself feel better by offloading my guilt onto them. Like I'm demanding forgiveness instead of earning it."

"Have you considered that apologizing isn't about making yourself feel better? That it might be about acknowledging the harm you caused and giving the other person the choice of how to respond?" I hadn't considered that. Or maybe I had, but the idea was too terrifying to accept—the idea that I could apologize and still be

rejected, that I could try to make amends and fail anyway.

"You can choose to do whatever you want, William," Dr. Suriya had said, her voice gentle but firm. "But you have to face the consequences."

The consequences.

Est's silence. Lego's absence. The covered portrait in the corner. The broken phone on my nightstand that I couldn't bring myself to replace because doing so would mean acknowledging that time was passing, that the world was moving on, that I was still here, still stuck, still drowning.

I added more crimson to the canvas. The red bled into the blue, creating something that looked like a bruise. Like a wound that wouldn't heal. Like the bruises I'd probably left on Lego's arm when I'd dragged him to the door.

"God," I whispered, the brush falling still in my hand. "What have I done?"

The painting was almost finished.

I stood back from the canvas, brush in hand, examining the work I'd created over the past week. It was one of the realistic pieces—a detailed rendering of my mother's garden as I remembered it from childhood. Rose bushes in full bloom. The old wooden bench where she used to sit and read. Sunlight filtering through the leaves of the ancient oak tree that had dominated the backyard.

The house my father was using as leverage. The home I might never see again if I couldn't prove I was "normal" enough to deserve it.

"You're making yourself crazy," I said to the empty room. "Stop thinking about the house. Focus on the work." But the work was the house. The house was my mother. My mother was everything I'd lost and everything I was fighting to reclaim.

I added a final touch—a small figure sitting on the bench, her back to the viewer, her hair falling loose over her shoulders. My mother. Or a memory of her. Or the ghost that haunted every canvas I painted.

"I miss you," I told the figure on the canvas. "I miss you so much."

The figure didn't respond. Of course she didn't. She was paint and memory, nothing more. But I could almost hear her voice anyway, soft and gentle, the way it had sounded when she'd corrected my behavior as a child: "William, sweetheart. You know you did something wrong. You know you hurt people who love you. What are you going to do about it?"

"I don't know," I whispered. "I don't know what to do."

"Yes, you do. You're just scared."

"I'm always scared."

"That's not an excuse. That's a starting point."

I set down my brush and walked to my bedroom, to the nightstand where my broken phone sat dark and silent. The screen was shattered, a spiderweb of cracks obscuring everything. Some of the buttons were missing—casualties of the moment I'd hurled it at the wall in a fit of rage I couldn't even remember properly now. But it still worked. Barely. If I angled it just right and pressed carefully on the remaining touch-sensitive areas. I picked it up.

Navigated to my contacts.

Found Lego's name.

Started typing.

I'm sorry for what I did. I'm sorry for hurting you. I'm sorry for everything. You didn't deserve any of it.

I stared at the words for a long moment.

Then I deleted them.

And then I typed them again.

And deleted them again.

And typed them one more time.

I'm sorry for what I did. I hurt you. I saw it happen and I didn't stop. That was wrong. I was wrong. You don't have to forgive me. You don't have to respond. But I needed you to know that I know what I did, and I'm sorry.

My thumb hovered over the send button.

"Face the consequences," Dr. Suriya's voice echoed in my head. "You can choose to do whatever you want, but face the consequences."

For a long moment, I stared at the words until they blurred into meaningless shapes. Then, with a violent tap of the backspace key, I erased them. Both of them. The white space returned, pristine and empty.

"It's just manipulation," I muttered to the empty room. My voice sounded scraped raw. "It's just you trying to make yourself feel better, William. You don't want to fix them; you just want to stop feeling guilty."

I pulled the cover off Est's portrait.

The charcoal face stared back at me, still unfinished, still waiting. The lines I'd drawn weeks ago—when everything had felt possible—looked different now. Sadder, maybe. Or just incomplete. A face caught between moments, between states of being, neither fully realized nor fully abandoned.

"I'm sorry," I told the portrait. My voice echoed in the empty apartment, swallowed by silence. "I'm sorry I couldn't be what you needed."

The apartment was quiet around me. The nausea had finally subsided—or at least become manageable—and the new medication was doing its work. I'd slept eight hours last night, a small miracle after two weeks of insomnia. My head was clearer than it had been in days.

Clear enough to feel the full weight of what I'd done.

I picked up a piece of charcoal and studied the half-finished portrait. Est's eyes—I'd captured something of them, something of that intensity that made you feel like you were the only person in the room when he looked at you. But I hadn't gotten the warmth right. Hadn't captured the way they softened when he laughed, or the curiosity that flickered in them when he was working on something interesting.

My hand moved before I made a conscious decision to let it. A stroke here, adding depth to the shadows around his jaw. Another stroke there, refining the line of his nose. The charcoal scraped against canvas, and slowly, incrementally, the portrait began to change.

I'd been afraid to finish it. That's what I realized as I worked. I'd been afraid that completing the portrait would mean admitting how much Est had meant to me, how much I'd lost when I pushed him away. As long as it remained unfinished, there was still possibility. Still hope. But possibility wasn't the same as reality. And hope without action was just another form of hiding.

The ceiling had become my enemy again.

I'd been staring at it for—I turned my head slightly to check the digital clock on my nightstand, the red numbers burning in the darkness—forty-seven minutes. Almost an hour of lying in this bed, in these same pajamas I'd been wearing for two days, waiting for sleep that refused to come.

The new medication was supposed to help with this. Dr. Chaisri had explained it during our last video session, her voice patient and clinical: "This one works differently from the previous prescriptions, William. It regulates the neurotransmitters that affect both mood and sleep. You may experience some adjustment effects—drowsiness during the day, alertness at night, vivid dreams. Give it two to three weeks to stabilize." Two to three weeks. An eternity when every

night stretched endless and every morning arrived too soon.

I turned onto my side, pulling the blanket up to my chin. The fabric felt wrong against my skin—rough where it should be soft, too warm where it should be cool. Something about it made my skin crawl, made every nerve ending fire with uncomfortable awareness.

When had I last washed these sheets?

The question surfaced with a wave of something that might have been shame. I tried to remember. A week ago? Two? The days had been blurring together lately, each one melting into the next without clear boundaries. I'd been spending so much time in the studio, preparing for the exhibition, that the basic maintenance of living had fallen by the wayside.

The sheets smelled like stale sweat and oil paint and the particular mustiness of fabric left too long without washing. The smell was subtle—I'd gotten used to it, the way you got used to anything when you lived alone with no one to notice—but now that I was aware of it, I couldn't ignore it.

With a groan that came from somewhere deeper than my throat, I threw off the covers and sat up.

If I couldn't sleep, I could at least do something useful. Something that would tire my body enough to match my exhausted mind.

The sheets came off in aggressive, jerking motions. Fitted sheet first—wrestling it from the corners of the mattress where it clung stubbornly, refusing to acknowledge that it had been neglected for too long. I yanked at the elastic edges, feeling the resistance, feeling the fabric finally give way with a sound like surrender. Then the flat sheet, tangled at the foot of the bed where I'd kicked it during restless nights. The pillowcases last, stripped from pillows that had gone flat and sad from weeks of use without being fluffed or replaced.

I bundled everything into my arms—a mass of pale blue fabric that my mother had bought for me years ago, before quarantine, before everything changed. The color she'd called "morning sky." The sheets that still smelled faintly of the lavender sachets she'd taught me to tuck between folded linens.

The walk to the washing machine was short—maybe fifteen steps from the bedroom to the hallway closet where the compact washer-dryer unit lived. But by the time I got there, I was slightly winded. My body had grown weak from months of inactivity, from barely eating, from spending hours hunched over canvases instead of moving through the world like a normal person.

I stuffed the bedding into the machine without separating colors or checking care labels. Added detergent—probably too much, but I couldn't bring myself to care

about exact measurements. Pressed the buttons with more force than necessary, listening to the mechanical clicks, the rush of water, the beginning whirl of the drum.

The sound was oddly comforting. Something was happening. Something was being cleaned. Something, at least, was moving forward.

I stood there for a long moment, watching through the small round window as the water began to soak into the fabric, turning everything dark and heavy. The agitation cycle started, the drum beginning its slow rotation, and I watched my mother's sheets tumble and twist in the soapy water.

Then I turned away and went to find fresh ones.

The linen closet was a time capsule.

Stacks of sheets and towels, organized by color and size—my mother's system, preserved even now, years after her death. She'd always believed in the power of a well-organized home. "A tidy space creates a tidy mind, William," she used to say, refolding towels I'd carelessly shoved onto shelves. "Taking care of your environment is taking care of yourself."

I ran my fingers along the folded edges, feeling the different textures. Cotton percale. Flannel for winter. The silky sateen set I'd never used because it had seemed too fancy for someone who slept alone. Near the bottom of the stack, I found what I was looking for: the pale blue sheets. Not the ones in the wash—those were the everyday set—but the nice ones. The ones my mother had given me as a birthday gift, years ago.

"The color of morning sky," she'd said when I'd unwrapped them. "Perfect for new beginnings."

When I unfolded them now, the scent of lavender rose up to meet me. The sachets she'd taught me to make—dried lavender from her garden, wrapped in small muslin pouches and tucked between layers of fabric. Even now, years later, the scent lingered. Faint but present. A ghost of the care she'd put into every detail of our lives.

My throat tightened.

I carried the sheets back to my bedroom and began the process of remaking the bed.

It was harder than it should have been.

My arms felt weak, my coordination slightly off—another side effect of the new medication, probably, or maybe just the cumulative effect of weeks without proper rest. The fitted sheet refused to cooperate, popping off one corner every time I secured another. I went around the bed three times before I finally managed to get

all four corners to stay.

The flat sheet was easier, but I was particular about the way it lay—smoothed flat, tucked at the foot, folded neatly at the top. Hospital corners, the way my mother had taught me. She'd learned it from her own mother, who'd learned it from hers, and she'd passed it down to me with the same patient insistence she'd applied to everything.

"There's a right way to do things, William. Not because the wrong way is bad, but because the right way shows respect. For yourself. For the things you own. For the space you live in."

I smoothed the fabric until there were no wrinkles, then added the pillowcases—fresh and clean, smelling of lavender and laundry detergent. When I was finished, the bed looked almost inviting. A small island of order in the chaos of my life. I threw myself onto it face-first, feeling the cool cotton against my cheek, breathing in the familiar scent.

And I waited for sleep to come.

It didn't.

Instead of drifting off, my mind began to wander. Back through the days. Back through the weeks. Back to the phone call that had changed everything.

The phone had been buzzing on my nightstand for what felt like an eternity before I'd worked up the courage to look at it. Unknown numbers usually meant spam—or worse, journalists fishing for interviews about "the reclusive artist" and his upcoming exhibition. I'd stopped answering calls from numbers I didn't recognize months ago.

But this number wasn't unknown. It was saved in my contacts under a name I rarely looked at, rarely thought about, rarely allowed myself to acknowledge: Dad.

My heart had started pounding immediately. Not with excitement—I'd lost the capacity for that particular emotion long ago—but with a complicated tangle of dread and hope and the bone-deep wariness of a child who'd learned that love could be withdrawn without warning. The last time we'd spoken, it had been through text messages. Angry ones. He'd been pushing for the sale of my mother's house—the house with the crooked garden gate and the blue-tiled kitchen, the house where I'd grown up and learned to paint and fallen in love with flowers. He'd wanted to "move on." I'd wanted to preserve. We'd said things that couldn't be unsaid, and then... silence. Weeks of it.

The phone kept buzzing.

I answered on what must have been the seventh or eighth ring, just before it would

have gone to voicemail.

"William." His voice was different than I remembered. Older. Tired. The sharp edges of his usual businessman's confidence seemed worn down, smoothed by something I couldn't identify.

"Dad."

The silence that followed was thick with everything we'd never said. Three years of avoidance. Three years of superficial texts and missed calls and the careful maintenance of distance. We were strangers who happened to share blood, nothing more.

"I've spoken with the lawyers," he said finally. "About the house." My breath caught. My mother's house. The last piece of her that still existed in the world. The place I'd been terrified of losing ever since he'd first mentioned selling.

"And?" The word came out barely above a whisper.

"I'm not selling it." He paused. "Not yet, anyway."

"What?" I sat up in bed, suddenly wide awake. "What do you mean?"

"I spoke with your doctor. Dr. Chaisri." His voice was gruff, uncomfortable—the voice of a man who didn't know how to talk about feelings but was trying anyway. "She contacted me last week. Told me about your treatment plan. The new medications. The increased therapy sessions." I hadn't known they'd been in contact. The thought made my skin prickle with unease—the feeling of being observed, evaluated, discussed without my knowledge.

"She seems to think you're making progress," he continued. "Real progress, not just going through the motions. She says you've been showing up for your sessions. Taking your medications consistently. Engaging with the process instead of just enduring it."

"I'm trying." The words came out broken, vulnerable in a way I hadn't intended. "I'm really trying, Dad."

"I know." A long pause. I could hear him breathing on the other end of the line— heavy breaths, the kind that came before difficult conversations. "That's why I'm calling. I have a proposal."

Proposal. The word landed like a stone in my stomach. My father didn't make proposals. He made demands. He set terms. He negotiated from positions of power, not vulnerability.

"I'm listening."

"Keep going to therapy. Twice a week, like you're doing now. Take your medications as prescribed—no skipping doses, no deciding you know better than the doctors. Work with your psychiatrist to find the right balance. And in a few months—six, maybe eight—if you can show me that you've made real progress..." He trailed off.

"If I can show you what?" I pressed.

"If you can prove that you can live a normal life again. Leave your apartment. Function in the world. Work, socialize, exist outside those four walls... then the house is yours." I couldn't speak. The words were too big, too impossible to process.

"My share," he clarified. "Your mother's half is already in your name—that was in her will. But my half, the portion that would go to you anyway eventually... I'll sign it over. The whole thing will be yours. Completely. Forever." Yours. The word echoed in my head, almost too bright to look at directly.

"Your mother would have wanted you to have it," he said, his voice softening just slightly. "I've always known that. But I couldn't just hand it over to someone who might—" He stopped himself.

But I heard what he didn't say. Someone who might never come out. Someone who might fade away entirely. Someone who might use that house as a larger cage instead of a home.

"I need to know you're stable, William. I need to know you're not going to disappear into your illness and never find your way back." I wanted to be angry at the conditions. Part of me was angry—at being treated like a child, at having my mother's legacy turned into a transaction, at the implication that I needed to earn something that should have been mine by right. But underneath the anger, something else bloomed. Hope. Fragile and terrifying, but unmistakably present.

"I'll do it," I said. "I'll prove it."

"Good." He sounded relieved, though he tried to hide it. "That's... that's good, William. I want this to work. I really do." We'd talked for a few more minutes after that—stilted, awkward conversation about deadlines and documentation and the practicalities of what he was proposing. And then he'd said goodbye, and the line had gone dead, and I'd sat in the darkness of my bedroom for a long time, holding the phone against my chest like a talisman.

The house wouldn't be sold. The house could be mine. I just had to become a person again first.

1:17 AM

The memory faded, leaving me staring at the same ceiling, in the same bed, with the same racing mind.

I was trying. I was genuinely, desperately trying. The therapy sessions twice a week—Dr. Suriya's calm voice guiding me through exercises, asking questions that hurt but needed to be asked. The psychiatry appointments—Dr. Chaisri adjusting my medications, explaining side effects, monitoring my progress with clinical precision. The pills I swallowed every morning and evening, trusting that the chemicals would do something I couldn't do on my own. But lying here, in a bed with fresh sheets and a body that refused to rest, I felt further from "normal" than ever.

What even was normal? I'd forgotten. Three years of isolation had warped my sense of what regular people did, how they moved through the world, what rhythms governed their days. Did normal people lie awake at 1 AM, mentally cataloguing their failures? Did normal people feel their hearts race at the thought of walking to the mailbox? Did normal people dream about their dead mothers and wake up crying? I turned onto my side. Then onto my back. Then onto my stomach, face pressed into the pillow until I had to come up for air.

Nothing worked.

The fresh sheets, for all their lavender scent and morning-sky color, weren't helping. If anything, they made me more aware of my own restlessness—every toss and turn leaving wrinkles in the pristine fabric, destroying the order I'd worked so hard to create.

I threw off the covers again and stood up. If sleep wouldn't come, I would work.

The studio was waiting for me. It always was, in these sleepless hours. When my mind wouldn't quiet and my body wouldn't rest, the paintings called to me—patient and demanding, the only conversation I could sustain.

I walked through the living room, past the couch with its rumpled blankets (I'd been sleeping there more often than the bed lately, finding comfort in smaller spaces), past the kitchen with its mountain of unwashed dishes (a problem for tomorrow, always tomorrow), and into the small room I'd converted into my workspace.

The smell hit me first. Turpentine and oil paint and linseed oil—the perfume of my profession, sharp and familiar and somehow comforting. Then the sight: canvases everywhere, leaning against walls and stacked on tables and propped on easels, some finished and some abandoned and some hovering in the uncertain space between.

And on the worktable, the stack of envelopes and printouts I'd been avoiding for days. The exhibition materials.

Solo exhibition: "Absence & Light"

Siam Contemporary Gallery

Opening in approximately two months

Space for 15-20 pieces

The curator's email was buried somewhere in that stack, along with shipping labels and insurance forms and the endless paperwork that came with trying to share your soul with the world. I pulled the papers toward me, shuffling through them with hands that felt clumsy, trying to make sense of the logistics I'd been ignoring.

Fifteen to twenty pieces. That was what they wanted. That was what I'd promised when I'd agreed to this exhibition—back when I'd been foolish enough to think I could paint my way through grief, that creating art would somehow heal the wounds that three years of isolation had carved into my psyche.

Now the deadline felt impossible. Now each canvas felt like a mountain to climb.

I looked around the studio, counting.

Some finished pieces that were ready for shipping—or close enough. These were the safe ones, the paintings I'd made before everything fell apart. Landscapes and still lifes and abstract compositions that spoke of beauty without bleeding too obviously.

Three more that were almost done. These were harder—portraits of grief, really, though you might not recognize them as such if you didn't know what to look for. A vase of wilted flowers. An empty chair by a window. A garden at twilight, the colors already fading into darkness.

And then there were the scattered ideas, the abandoned attempts, the canvases that had stalled halfway through because I'd lost the thread of what I was trying to say. Five more pieces. Minimum. Probably eight to be safe.

The clock on the wall read 1:52 AM.

I rolled up my sleeves and got to work.

Packaging paintings was meditative in its own way. There was a system to it—a series of steps that required focus but not creativity, that occupied my hands while leaving my mind free to wander or, better yet, to quiet entirely.

Bubble wrap first. I cut sheets to size from the large roll I kept in the corner, measuring twice before each cut the way my mother had taught me. "Measure twice, cut once, William. Waste is disrespectful to the materials and to yourself." The bubble wrap was laid carefully across each canvas, the bubbles facing inward to protect the paint, the edges taped down with the blue painter's tape that wouldn't leave residue.

Then cardboard corners. I had a supply of them—pre-cut protective pieces that fitted over each vulnerable corner of the frame. They clicked into place with a

satisfying sound, like puzzle pieces finding their home.

Then the outer wrapping. More bubble wrap, then brown kraft paper, then packing tape in long strips that I pulled from the dispenser with a sound like tearing fabric.

Each painting became a small, protected thing as I worked. Safe for travel. Ready to leave me and enter the world.

This was an old piece—years old, from a trip I'd taken with my mother during my university years. She'd wanted to show me the flower markets there, the way the vendors arranged their wares in cascades of color, the way the early morning sun turned everything golden and soft. I'd sketched constantly during that trip, filling notebooks with quick studies that I'd later turned into this: a quiet street corner, vendors setting up their stalls, light streaming through gaps in the awnings like visible fingers of gold.

I wrapped it carefully, remembering the smell of jasmine that had filled the air that morning. The sound of my mother's laughter when I'd gotten paint on my shirt. The way she'd looked at me—proud, always proud—as I'd worked to capture what we were seeing.

My mother's mangoes. From the tree in her garden, the one that had started as a seed she'd planted when I was born. "Your tree," she'd called it. "It will grow as you grow." And it had—awkward and leggy in my childhood, lush and fruit-bearing by the time I'd left for art school. The mangoes it produced were smaller than store-bought ones, but sweeter. She'd bring them to me in baskets when she visited, proud as if she'd made them herself. I wrapped this painting with extra care, my hands lingering on the edges of the frame.

Not my studio. My mother's café—the small space on the ground floor of her house where she'd served coffee and homemade pastries to neighbors and friends. I'd painted it from memory after quarantine made visiting impossible. The light through the windows. The worn wooden tables. The display case that had always held something fresh from her oven.

I stopped, my hands trembling on the packing tape. Each painting was a piece of her. A piece of us. And I was wrapping them up to send away, to be judged by strangers who would never know what they were really looking at. I took a breath. Then another.

Then I kept working.

The stack of wrapped paintings had grown to eight. Eight pieces, cocooned in protective layers, stacked carefully against the wall near the studio door. Ready for pickup. Ready for shipping. Ready to enter a world I'd been hiding from for three years.

My shoulders ached from the repetitive motions. My back was stiff from bending over the worktable. My eyes burned with a tiredness that had nothing to do with the hour and everything to do with the relentless effort of existing.

But there were still four more finished paintings to wrap. And the almost-finished ones to complete. And the ideas that existed only as sketches and color studies, waiting to be transformed into something real.

Two months. Approximately eight weeks. Fifty-six days, give or take.

It wasn't enough time. It couldn't be enough time. But it was all the time I had. I picked up another canvas—a landscape of the northern hills, painted from photographs I'd taken years ago—and began the wrapping process again.

The clock on the studio wall read just past five when I finally stepped back from the worktable.

Twelve paintings, wrapped and labeled and stacked near the door. Every finished piece I had, ready for the post office. Ready for the gallery. Ready for the exhibition that would either prove I was still an artist or expose me as a fraud who'd been hiding behind his apartment walls for too long.

The light outside the windows had shifted from the deep black of night to the gray-blue of approaching dawn. Not sunrise yet—that was still an hour away—but the first suggestion that darkness wouldn't last forever. The first hint that another day was coming whether I was ready for it or not.

I was exhausted. The bone-tiredness had deepened into something that felt almost physical, like gravity had increased just for me. My body screamed for rest while my mind continued its endless spinning. Dr. Chaisri's voice echoed in my head: "If you can't sleep naturally, take the sleeping medication. Don't fight through insomnia. Your brain needs rest to process the changes we're making with the other medications."

I walked to the bathroom, found the orange bottle on the counter—the sleeping pills, separate from my morning and evening medications—and shook two tablets into my palm. They were small and white, innocuous-looking for something that was supposed to shut down my racing thoughts. I swallowed them with water from the tap, grimacing at the chalky aftertaste, and went to my bedroom. The fresh sheets were waiting, lavender-scented and wrinkle-free. I climbed under the covers, pressing my face into the pillow, and willed the medication to work.

The pills were doing something, but not sleeping.

I could feel them working—a heaviness settling into my limbs, a fogginess creeping into the edges of my vision. My body was growing sluggish, reluctant to move, like I was sinking slowly into a pool of warm honey. But my mind refused to follow.

Thoughts continued to race, bouncing off each other like molecules in a heated chamber. The exhibition. The house. My father's conditions. The paintings that still needed to be finished. The emails I hadn't answered. The calls I'd been avoiding.

Est.

The name surfaced unbidden, bringing with it a flood of complicated feelings I'd been trying to ignore.

Lego.

And that name—that particular name—made my chest tighten with something that felt dangerously close to guilt.

When had I last seen Lego? When had I last responded to one of his messages? He texted me regularly—checking in, asking how I was doing, reminding me about things I'd forgotten. But lately, I'd been letting the messages go unanswered. Letting the calls go to voicemail. Pulling further and further into myself until the people who loved me became blurry figures on the other side of a wall I couldn't seem to stop building.

The medication was making it hard to think clearly, but the guilt remained sharp and present. I should reach out. I should text him. I should— My eyelids drooped. My thoughts began to fragment. But sleep still wouldn't come. Not real sleep. Just this strange, uncomfortable twilight state—too drowsy to function, too awake to rest.

I opened my eyes with effort and looked at the ceiling.

This wasn't working.

The living room wasn't any better.

The couch—my usual backup sleeping spot—was covered in paintings I hadn't yet wrapped. Smaller pieces, more personal ones. Studies of hands and flowers and light falling through windows. Things that weren't ready for the exhibition, might never be ready, but existed anyway as evidence that I was still creating. I moved a few of them to the floor, clearing just enough space to lie down. But when I tried to settle onto the cushions, my body protested. The angle was wrong. The support was wrong. Everything was wrong. The medication was making my limbs feel like they were filled with sand. But my eyes wouldn't close. My brain wouldn't quiet. I was trapped in the worst possible state—too impaired to do anything useful, too awake to actually rest.

I sat up with a groan and looked around the apartment.

The bathroom.

The thought came from somewhere unexpected, irrational and insistent. There was

a bathtub in the bathroom. Old-fashioned, deep, the kind you could sink into and feel surrounded by. The porcelain would be cool against my overheated skin. The walls of the tub would rise up around me, close and containing. Maybe there—in that small, enclosed space—I could finally rest. I dragged myself off the couch and walked toward the bathroom, my feet heavy, my movements slow.

The bathtub was exactly what I needed.

I didn't fill it with water. The thought didn't even occur to me. I just climbed in—pajamas and all—and lowered myself down, curling onto my side with my back pressed against one curved wall and my knees pressed against the other. Cold. The porcelain was cold through the thin fabric of my pajamas, a shock at first that made me gasp. But as my body adjusted, the coldness became grounding. Soothing. Real in a way that the bed and the couch hadn't been.

The walls of the tub rose up around me like the sides of a cradle—close enough that I could touch them without extending my arms, high enough that the world beyond disappeared. Just me and the white porcelain and the small square of window above me, showing a sky that was slowly lightening from black to gray to the soft blue of early morning.

Contained. That was the word I'd been looking for. In the bathtub, with the porcelain holding me on all sides, I felt contained. The apartment—with all its chaos and clutter and unfinished work—couldn't reach me here. The world—with all its demands and expectations and impossible conditions—was shut out.

My phone was still in my hand. I'd been carrying it without realizing, a habit so ingrained I barely noticed anymore. The screen was cracked—damaged from when I'd thrown it against the wall during a particularly bad moment weeks ago—but it still functioned. Barely. I clutched it against my chest like a talisman and closed my eyes.

The medication, finally, was starting to work properly.

I felt myself sinking. The heaviness that had been frustrating in the bed was different here, in this small and bounded space. It felt safe. It felt like being held.

The bathroom faded. The cold porcelain faded. The sky in the window faded.

Everything faded into the soft, hazy gray of approaching dreams.

I know this place.

The realization surfaces slowly, like a bubble rising through deep water. The walls, the furniture, the quality of the light streaming through the windows—all of it is aching, impossibly familiar.

I'm home.

Not my apartment. Not the sterile, isolated box where I've spent the last three years hiding from the world. This is my real home. My mother's house. The house with the crooked garden gate and the blue-tiled kitchen. The house where I learned to paint and to cook and to love flowers. The house where my mother lived and laughed and eventually got sick and left me forever.

I'm in the living room. The old sofa—brown corduroy, worn soft by years of use—is beneath me. The windows are open, letting in an evening breeze that smells like jasmine and cut grass and something baking in the kitchen. Everything is golden, lit by that particular quality of late-afternoon sunlight that I've been trying to capture in paintings for years.

And I'm small. Young enough that my feet don't quite reach the floor when I sit. Young enough that the world still feels manageable, still feels safe. Young enough that my mother is still here, still alive, still the center of everything.

Because she is here.

Right here.

I'm lying on the sofa with my head in her lap, and she's running her fingers through my hair the way she used to when I was upset. Slow, rhythmic strokes that make my scalp tingle with comfort. I can feel the warmth of her thighs beneath my cheek. I can smell her perfume—something floral, something soft, something I've been trying to remember for three years and could never quite capture.

I'm crying.

Great, heaving sobs that shake my whole body. Tears streaming down my face and soaking into the fabric of her dress, leaving dark spots that spread and overlap. My ribs ache from the force of the crying. My throat is raw. My chest feels like it might crack open.

"Shh, shh," she's saying, her voice a gentle melody. "It's alright, William. It's alright. I'm here."

"They're so mean," I manage to sob. "They said—they called me—"

"It doesn't matter what the kids at your school say, William." Her fingers keep moving through my hair. Steady. Soothing. Present.

"They don't understand you. They see someone who's different—someone who feels things deeply, who sees beauty where they see nothing—and it scares them. But different isn't bad, sweetheart. Different is a gift."

"They don't think it's a gift." I can hear the bitterness in my voice, even through the tears. "They think I'm weird. They think I'm—"

"What they think doesn't define you." Her hand moves from my hair to my cheek, tilting my face so I'm looking up at her. Her eyes are warm, so warm, filled with a love that seems endless and unconditional. "What you create, what you feel, how you move through the world—that's what defines you. Not the opinions of boys who can't see past their own fear."

The memory shifts. I'm still in the living room, still on the sofa, still with my head in her lap. But I'm different now. Bigger. Angrier. The tears have dried, replaced by a hot shame that burns in my chest.

"William." My mother's voice is still gentle, but there's something else in it now. Something that sounds like concern.

"I know," I mumble. "I shouldn't have done it."

"You can't always solve everything by hitting your classmates." The words land like stones. I flinch, even though I know they're true. Even though I know what I did was wrong.

"They started it," I say, but the excuse sounds hollow even to my own ears. "They pushed me first. They wouldn't stop laughing. They—"

"I know." Her fingers find my hair again, resuming their soothing rhythm. "I know they hurt you. I know it felt impossible to do anything else. But hitting them back... William, it doesn't undo what they did. It doesn't make the words hurt less. And it gets you in trouble, sweetheart. It makes people see you as the problem instead of them." I cry harder, because she's right. She's always right.

"If it happens again," she says softly, "tell Mom. Come to me. Let me help. You don't have to fight alone. You never have to fight alone."

You never have to fight alone.

The words echo through the golden air, spreading outward like ripples in water.

And then the dream changes.

The living room dissolves.

The warmth of my mother's lap fades, replaced by something cooler. Harder. The scent of jasmine disappears, replaced by antiseptic and cleaning chemicals and the particular staleness of air that's been recycled through machines too many times.

I open my eyes—or dream that I open them—and the house is gone.

I'm somewhere else now.

White. Everything is white. Walls, floor, ceiling, all washed in that pale, sterile brightness that only exists in hospitals and dreams. The light is harsh and even,

coming from everywhere and nowhere at once, buzzing faintly with the sound of fluorescent tubes.

A hospital?

I try to move, but my body won't respond. I'm lying on something hard—a bed, a table, a floor?—and my limbs feel impossibly heavy, pinned down by a gravity that seems to have multiplied just for me.

Someone is standing in front of me.

I can't see them clearly. The white light is too bright, washing out their features, turning them into a silhouette against the blinding glare. But I can see their outline: small, delicate, with hair that falls in long, dark waves past their shoulders. The hair catches the light, shining like silk, moving slightly as if disturbed by a breeze I can't feel.

Lego?

The thought surfaces, confused and uncertain. But that can't be right. The Lego I know is twelve years old—a whiny kid with a sharp smile and endless questions, who followed me around after that first art class like I was the most interesting person in the world. The Lego I know has short, messy hair and boundless energy and a laugh that fills every room he enters.

This figure doesn't look like that Lego. This figure is older. Thinner. Their hair falls almost to their waist, dark and shining, nothing like the cropped style I remember.

Who are you?

The question forms in my mind but won't make it to my lips. My mouth won't move. Nothing will move. I'm trapped in this white space, watching a figure I can't quite see drift closer and closer.

Who am I?

That question is scarier. In this place—wherever this is, whatever this is—I'm not sure anymore. Am I the crying child in my mother's lap? Am I the angry teenager who hit his classmates? Am I the adult who hasn't left his apartment in three years? Am I all of these? None of them? Someone else entirely?

Where am I?

Where?

The figure moves closer. Their outline shimmers and wavers, unstable as a reflection in disturbed water. They're reaching toward me, their hand extending into the white light—

And then—

I woke. Cold. Hard surface beneath me, pressing against my hip, my shoulder, my cheek. Dim light filtering through a small window somewhere above my head, the quality of it telling me that time had passed—hours of it—while I'd been trapped in dreams that felt more real than waking.

For a long, disorienting moment, I didn't know where I was. The dream was still clinging to me—the golden warmth of my mother's living room, the harsh white sterility of the hospital-that-wasn't, the figure with the long dark hair reaching toward me. I could still feel the echo of my mother's fingers in my hair. Could still smell jasmine and antiseptic, layered on top of each other like geological strata.

Then reality reasserted itself.

The bathtub. I was in my bathtub, in my apartment, curled on my side with my back against the cold porcelain and my phone still clutched in my hand like I'd been afraid to let it go even in sleep. The screen was dark, the cracked surface reflecting nothing.

And there was someone else in the room. I thought I was still dreaming. The figure from the white room was here—small and delicate, sitting on my bathroom floor with their back against the wall and their knees drawn up to their chest. Their hair fell past their shoulders in dark waves, just like in the dream. Their arms were wrapped around something small and white and soft—a stuffed animal, it looked like, clutched against their chest like a talisman.

But unlike the dream, this figure was real. Solid. Present in a way that the shimmering silhouette hadn't been.

Their face—

I blinked, trying to clear the fog from my vision, trying to reconcile what I was seeing with what I expected. Pale. Tear-stained. Eyes red and swollen from crying. Concealer that had smeared and faded, revealing dark circles underneath. Lips slightly parted, as if they'd been about to speak but lost the words.

Recognition crashed over me like a wave.

"Lego?" My voice came out ruined. Cracked and rough, barely recognizable as my own. The word scraped through my throat like sandpaper, leaving rawness in its wake.

"Hi, P'Will." Their voice wasn't much better than mine. Thick with tears, small with exhaustion, carefully controlled in a way that suggested they'd been sitting there for a while, waiting, trying to prepare themselves for this moment.

I stared at them, my brain struggling to process.

This was Lego. But not the Lego I kept expecting to see—not the twelve-year-old who had followed me home from art class all those years ago, all sharp questions and endless energy. This was Lego at nineteen, with extensions that had become part of his identity, with makeup that softened his features, with the weight of years in his eyes that hadn't been there before.

When had he gotten so old? When had any of us gotten so old?

"The new medication." I heard myself say, the words coming out automatically, filling the silence because I didn't know what else to say, "keeps giving me strange dreams."

He nodded, not speaking. Just watching me with those red-rimmed eyes, that exhausted face, that careful stillness of someone who'd been waiting a long time for someone else to wake up.

I tried to sit up. My body protested violently—stiff and aching from hours spent curled in a bathtub, every joint creaking like rusty hinges, every muscle complaining about the awkward position I'd forced it into. But I managed, propping myself on one elbow, lifting my head enough to look at him properly.

He looked worse up close. The concealer couldn't hide the purple bruises of exhaustion under his eyes. His cheeks seemed thinner than I remembered, the bones more prominent. His hands, wrapped around the stuffed rabbit, were trembling slightly. Something had happened. Something was wrong.

I reached out without thinking.

My hand crossed the space between us—the small distance between the tub and the wall, which somehow felt like miles—and found his cheek. His skin was cool beneath my fingers. Real. Solid. Present in a way that the dream-figures hadn't been. "You're real." I whispered.

He nodded, and the tears that had been threatening spilled over, streaming down his face in silent tracks.

The words I wanted to say jammed in my throat. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry I haven't been answering your messages. I'm sorry I've been disappearing. I'm sorry I'm such a mess that you have to check on me like this.

But all that came out was:

"I'm sorry." My voice cracked on the words. Fractured like thin ice over deep water. "I'm so sorry, Lego. I didn't mean to—I wasn't trying to—"

The sentences wouldn't form. I was too tired, too medicated, too overwhelmed by the relief of waking up to a face I loved.

"I just wanted to sleep," I managed. "I just wanted it to be quiet for a while. The thoughts in my head—they never stop. And I took the sleeping pills and I tried to rest but nothing was working, and I thought—the bathtub seemed—" I stopped, frustrated with my own incoherence.

"I know," Lego whispered. His hand came up to cover mine where it still rested against his cheek. His fingers were cold, but his grip was firm. "I know, P'Will. I understand."

We talked in the bathroom. I don't know how long. The quality of the light through the small window shifted gradually—from the gray of early morning to something brighter, more golden. But I wasn't tracking the minutes.

Lego told me about the phone call. My manager, worried and efficient, calling him when she couldn't reach me. The panic that had driven him across the city, to my building, up the elevator, through my door with the spare key I'd given him for emergencies.

"I was so scared," he admitted, his voice breaking on the words. "Your manager said you weren't answering, that the paintings were due for shipping, that no one could get through to you. And I hadn't heard from you in days, and I kept texting and calling and you never responded, and I thought—when I came in and the bathroom door was closed, I thought—" He couldn't finish the sentence.

I reached out again, touching his face. "I'm still here. I promise. I'm still here."

"The tub." I tried to explain, my words still coming out sluggish from the medication. "It's grounding. The porcelain, the cold—it's like being held. The pressure on all sides. It helps when everything feels too big. I just lay down and I fell asleep. That's all. The medication makes me sleep so deep—I didn't hear my phone, didn't hear anything."

He nodded like he understood. Maybe he did. Maybe everyone had their version of a bathtub—a small, enclosed space where the world couldn't reach them.

Eventually, he helped me climb out. My body protested every movement, stiff and aching from sleeping in such an awkward position for who knew how long. But I managed, leaning on him more than I wanted to admit, letting him guide me out of the bathroom and down the hallway and into the living room.

The apartment looked different in the daylight. The chaos was still there—paintings stacked against the walls, wrapped packages piled near the door, the evidence of my late-night work session covering every surface. But with Lego here, with another person occupying the space, it felt less suffocating. Less like a tomb.

He sat me on the couch—clearing away the smaller canvases first, moving them carefully to the floor—and disappeared into the kitchen. I heard sounds of

movement. Cupboards opening and closing. The rustle of bags. The familiar click of a coffee cup being set down.

When he returned, he was carrying a small feast: sandwiches wrapped in paper from some café, a bottle of cold coffee, a bottle of iced tea. Simple things. Practical things. But they looked like treasures.

"Eat," he said, in a tone that left no room for argument.

I ate.

The coffee was strong and slightly bitter, cutting through the lingering fog from the sleeping pills. The sandwich was unremarkable—something with chicken and vegetables from a chain shop—but it tasted better than anything I'd had in days. My stomach, which had been a clenched fist of anxiety for so long, slowly began to unwind as I chewed and swallowed, forcing food into a body that had forgotten it needed fuel.

"You brought flowers," I observed, looking at the table. The old bouquet—the one that had been wilting in its vase for weeks, petals browning and water growing murky—was gone. In its place stood a fresh arrangement: white blooms, carefully arranged, breathing life into the gray apartment.

"I always bring flowers," Lego tried to smile, but it wobbled at the edges. "It's Wednesday." I looked at the clock on the wall. Wednesday. I'd lost track of the days again.

We sat in silence for a while, me eating and drinking, Lego watching with an attention that felt almost protective. But I could see the tension in his shoulders. The way his fingers kept twisting the hem of his sweatshirt. The slight tremor that spoke of anxiety barely held in check. Something was wrong. Something beyond my disappearance, my unresponsiveness, my sleeping in bathtubs.

"Tell me," I said, setting down the half-finished sandwich. "Tell me what happened."

He looked up, startled. "What?"

"You've been crying. Before you got here—maybe for hours, from the look of it. And even now—" I gestured vaguely at his face, at the evidence of tears and exhaustion. "What's wrong, Lego?"

The walls went up. I could see it happening—the practiced smile, the dismissive shrug, the deflection that had become second nature over years of putting everyone else first.

"I'm fine, P'Will. I was just worried about you."

"Don't." The word came out sharper than I intended. "Don't do that. Not with me."

He flinched. The smile dissolved. "I'm asking," I said, gentling my voice. "I'm here, and I'm asking. Tell me."

The silence stretched between us, heavy and fragile.

And then he broke. The tears came first—fresh ones, hot and fast, streaming down his cheeks in a way that suggested he'd been holding them back for hours. Then the words, tumbling out between sobs:

"I was rejected. Without even being able to confess my feelings."

"What?"

"There's someone." He sniffled, wiping at his face with the back of his hand. "Was someone. I've been—for months, I've been in love with him. And I thought maybe he—I thought the way he looked at me, the way he talked to me—I thought it meant something. So I got flowers. I was going to tell him. I went to his studio and—" His voice broke completely. The sobs that followed were ugly, wrenching sounds that seemed to come from somewhere deep inside him.

"I overheard him talking," he managed between gasps. "To a friend. About me. He called me—he said I was just a kid. A flower-obsessed kid. Not his type."

The words landed like physical blows. I reached out without thinking, pulling him toward me, my hand finding his hair. I stroked it the way my mother used to stroke mine—slow, rhythmic movements that had always made me feel safe.

"He's a fool." I said. The words came out fierce. Angry in a way I hadn't felt in a long time.

"P'Will—"

"I'm serious." I kept stroking his hair, even as he shook with sobs. "Anyone who looks at you and sees only a child—who can't see everything you've survived, everything you've built, everything you are—they're blind. They're a fool. They don't deserve you."

Someone had dared to reject my Lego. My handsome, brilliant, soft-hearted younger brother who had been showing up for me without fail for six years. Whoever this person was, they were an idiot who couldn't see beyond their own nose.

Lego cried harder, pressing his face against my shoulder. I let him—let him sob and shake and fall apart, because god knew he'd earned the right to break down. He'd been strong for so long. Too long. When the storm finally passed, when the sobs had faded to sniffles and then to shaky breaths, we sat in silence for a while. Two broken people, holding each other together.

"Let's clean up," I said finally. "The apartment's a disaster."

Lego looked up at me, his eyes still red, something like relief flickering across his face. "Okay."

We worked side by side for the next hour.

I sent a text to my manager first: I'm okay. Sorry for the silence. Paintings ready for shipping. The words felt inadequate, but they were true.

Then the dishes—the mountain of them that had been accumulating for days, maybe weeks. I loaded them into the dishwasher while Lego wiped down the counters. The hot water and soap suds were oddly satisfying, washing away the physical evidence of my neglect.

The floor came next. I found the mop in the closet—dusty from disuse—and worked my way across the living room, pushing aside paint supplies and wrapped canvases to reach every corner. Lego gathered the scattered laundry into baskets and loaded the washing machine with the efficiency of someone who'd been taking care of himself for years.

The apartment transformed around us. Order emerged from chaos. The space began to feel less like a prison and more like a home. When we finished, we collapsed onto the bed together—freshly made, sheets still faintly scented with lavender from my late-night cleaning frenzy. Lego on one side, me on the other, both of us staring at the ceiling in comfortable silence.

"You're thinner," I observed. "You've lost weight." He didn't deny it. Just shrugged, a small, tired motion.

The observation sat heavy between us. I thought about all the days I'd been so consumed by my own struggles that I hadn't noticed his. All the messages I'd left unanswered. All the times he'd reached out and I'd let my silence speak for me.

"Stay over tonight." I said. The words came out more like a plea than a request. "Please. I don't want to be alone."

Lego turned his head to look at me, surprise flickering across his features. In all our years of friendship, I rarely asked for things. I took his care for granted, accepted his support without thinking, never acknowledged how much I needed him.

Then he smiled—small and genuine, the first real smile I'd seen from him since he'd appeared in my bathroom doorway. "Okay," he said. "Okay, P'Will."

I reached for my phone and ordered pizza. His favorite—the one with extra cheese and the garlic bread he always stole from my plate—plus a second option in case he wanted variety. The app said forty-five minutes for delivery.

While we waited, my eyes drifted toward the front door. The trash bags. They were still there. A pile of black plastic that had been accumulating for over a week,

maybe longer. Every day I'd told myself I would take them out. Every day I'd stood at the door with my hand on the knob, heart pounding, and couldn't make myself turn it.

The hallway was too long. The outside was too vast. The simple act of walking twenty feet to the trash chute seemed as impossible as climbing a mountain.

"P'Will?" Lego had noticed me staring.

"The trash," I said quietly, the admission feeling like failure. "I've been trying to take it out. Every day. But I couldn't—last week I got as far as the door, and I just—" I stopped, unable to finish.

Lego didn't ask for explanations. Didn't look at me with pity or concern. He just stood up from the bed and walked over to the pile of bags. "Let's do it together," he said.

We stood at the door, trash bags in hand. Mine in my right hand, his in his left. The bags were heavy—full of over a week's worth of garbage, takeout containers and empty water bottles and the detritus of a life lived in isolation. Evidence of survival, however unglamorous.

My heart was pounding. That familiar anxiety—the one that had kept me prisoner for three years—was screaming in my ears. Don't do it. Don't open that door. Out there is danger. Out there is judgment. Out there is the world, and the world will hurt you.

"It's just a few steps," Lego said softly. "To the trash area and back. I'll be right here."

I looked at him—at his red-rimmed eyes and tired face, at the strength he was finding from somewhere even after everything he'd been through today. If he could be brave after having his heart broken, couldn't I manage twenty feet? I took a breath. Then another.

Then I opened the door.

The hallway was empty. Quiet. Just polished floors and neutral walls and the distant hum of the building's ventilation system. No threats. No watching eyes. No judgment lurking in corners, waiting to pounce.

Just space.

Lego stepped out first, turning to look at me with patient, encouraging eyes. He didn't push. Didn't rush. Just waited, giving me the time I needed.

I followed.

One step. Then another. My legs felt unsteady—weak from weeks of inactivity, shaking with an anxiety that had no logical basis. My breath was coming too fast, my heart hammering against my ribs like it was trying to escape. But I kept moving.

The trash chute was at the end of the hall—maybe twenty feet away. An eternity. A lifetime.

Step by step, I closed the distance.

The fluorescent lights hummed overhead. My footsteps echoed on the polished floor. Lego walked beside me, his presence steady and reassuring, never getting ahead but never falling behind.

We reached the trash chute. I lifted the lid—the metal cool against my shaking fingers, the hinge squeaking slightly from lack of use. I looked down into the darkness of the shaft, the void that disappeared into the building's depths.

Then I dropped the bag.

It tumbled away, swallowed by the darkness, and was gone.

Done.

Such a small thing. Such an ordinary, everyday act that most people did without thinking, without effort, without any awareness of how monumental it felt to someone who'd been hiding from the world for three years.

For me, it felt like surviving a war.

I stood there for a moment, breathing hard, tears pricking at my eyes. Lego dropped his bag too—another quiet thump, another ordinary moment—and then turned to face me.

"You did it." he whispered.

I had.

I'd stepped outside my apartment. Just a few feet. Just for a minute. Just to the trash chute and back.

But I'd done it.

We walked back together—step by step, side by side—and when the door closed behind us, I leaned against it and let the tears come.

Relief. Exhaustion. Something that might have been pride.

"Thank you." I managed. Lego just squeezed my hand and smiled.

The pizza arrived thirty minutes later.

We ate on the bed, cross-legged and informal, the boxes open between us. Lego stole the garlic bread, as expected. I pretended to be annoyed, as expected. We talked about nothing important—movies we wanted to watch, songs we'd been listening to, the small safe topics that filled space without requiring too much emotional weight. But underneath the normalcy, something had shifted. I wasn't fixed. I wasn't healed. The road ahead was still long and uncertain—therapy sessions and medication adjustments and the slow, painful work of rebuilding a life. The exhibition deadline. The house. My father's conditions. All of it still waiting.

But I'd taken a step.

And I hadn't taken it alone.

Later, after the pizza was finished and the boxes were thrown away—Lego taking them to the trash chute himself, proving that it was possible, that the hallway was just a hallway, that the outside world wasn't as dangerous as my brain believed—we lay on the bed in the darkness. The city glowed outside my windows. All those lights, all those lives, all those people going about their business without knowing or caring that someone in this building was fighting just to exist.

"P'Will?" Lego's voice was soft in the darkness.

"Yeah?"

"I'm glad you're still here." I reached out, found his hand in the dark.

"Me too." I said quietly. "Me too."

Silence settled between us—comfortable, warm, nothing like the suffocating quiet I'd grown used to.

"We're going to be okay." Lego murmured, his eyes drifting closed. "Both of us. We're going to be okay."

I wanted to believe him. I wanted to believe that the small victory of tonight—the trash run, the cleaning, the confession of pain on both sides—was the beginning of something better.

Healing isn't linear, Dr. Suriya had said.

But maybe, with the right people beside you, it was at least possible. "Yeah." I whispered, watching Lego's breathing slow into the rhythm of sleep. "We're going to be okay."

I closed my eyes.

I didn't check my phone for messages that night. Didn't draft texts I wouldn't send,

didn't compose apologies I was too afraid to deliver. The drafts folder on my phone was full of unsent words—to Est, to my manager, to my father, to all the people I'd been failing.

But tonight, none of that mattered.

Tonight, I had Lego beside me. Tonight, I had taken the trash out. Tonight, I had eaten pizza and laughed at something stupid and felt, for a few brief hours, like a person instead of a problem. Tomorrow I would face the exhibition. The deadlines. The emails. The complicated work of becoming someone worth loving. But tonight, I just let myself rest.

And for the first time in a long time, sleep came easily.